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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Stellungnahme / comment

Zur Verfügung gestellt in Kooperation mit / provided in cooperation with:

GIGA German Institute of Global and Area Studies

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Haastrup, T., & Ansorg, N. (2016). *Brexit will blow a hole in EU-Africa relations*. London: The Conversation Trust.
<https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-55558-2>

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Brexit will blow a hole in EU-Africa relations

September 29, 2016 5.07pm BST

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In the flood of debate and opinion which followed the UK's Brexit referendum, journalists and scholars alike have focused on the economic impact on Britain, the future of trade agreements and the effect on the rest of the EU. With a few exceptions, implications outside of Europe are often ignored. Africa barely gets a look in, but the shockwaves here could be deeply damaging.

Clearly, the economic and aid implications matter, as we and others have pointed out. Here, however, we want to examine the socio-political and diplomatic dimensions beyond Europe of what is a seemingly European decision. This is especially important given the broad range and nature of Africa-EU relations.

Both in the trade negotiations that have led to EU economic partnership agreements (EPAs) with Africa, but especially in the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), the UK has often played the role of an advocate, at least rhetorically. For example, although the British government always supported the controversial EPAs, it also argued that the EU should give compensation to those countries that lose out due to new modes of cooperation.

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Similarly, the UK has in recent years been the strongest voice for reform of the CAP. As European fisheries and farmers have been subsidised through the CAP, to the disadvantage of African farmers, reform is essential. Other European countries have been reluctant to commit to it.



Farm fears. CIAT/Flickr, CC BY-SA

There is legitimate concern that with the UK gone, certain diplomatic avenues will be closed. For African countries, the UK's departure from the EU signals the loss of an advocate within the EU.

Peace and security

Politically, Brexit affects African countries in a variety of ways. Importantly, however, its potential effects on peace and security have not really been addressed.

Overall, the EU is the main contributor to the African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA). Within it, the UK has been particularly instrumental in its support for peace operations on the continent. In Somalia, for example, where the EU supports the African Union mission, the UK has played a role as financial contributor as well as a key partner within the EU Training Mission in Somalia.

Given the unique role of this training mission in rebuilding a Somali army, the UK's absence will be a big loss as one of the top contributors. The uncertainty around continued contributions, or how it will now work, further fragments donor coordination in the country. Moreover, it adds unnecessary administrative costs for the African Union and Somalia in negotiating new agreements for UK and EU engagement.



Somali soldiers at a passing out parade after training. AMISOM Public Information/Flickr

Brexit also has implications for the broader direction of the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) missions, the majority of which take place in Africa. Within the CSDP, the UK has always been a strong backer of prioritising peacebuilding and conflict prevention. This is in contrast to the French approach of a stronger military focus as the main peace and security practice. The withdrawal of the UK might thus translate into an identity change for the EU's security architecture and its security practices in Africa, especially if France fully reasserts dominance.

Integration trends

There are broader implications of the UK vote, too. Brexit fundamentally calls into question the EU's credibility as a promoter of regional integration. Although not a replica of the EU, the African Union, Africa's continental regional organisation, views the EU as a successful vision that reflects some of its own aspirations.

There are no signs yet of deceleration in Africa's regional integration processes, but the fallout from Brexit will provide a teaching moment for Africans. It serves to highlight what is at stake in regional integration – and the negative consequences of disintegration. Brexit has already provided an opportunity for African politicians and bureaucrats to press for the advantages of regional integration more vigorously.



The African Union has much to learn from EU woes. Huebi/Flickr

And in the background to these diplomatic, political and strategic considerations there lies something ugly in the social impact of the referendum process and its aftermath. The documented hate crimes following the vote echo negative attitudes to the refugee crisis, with Brexit helping to set the tone for narratives of the UK and EU's relationship with and in the world.

An idea emerged during campaigning of the “British” – represented predominantly as white, Northern Europeans – being against those presented otherwise as “immigrants”. And it's not just in the UK. The Brexit vote has heightened tensions around how Europe as a whole treats its diaspora residents.

This of course comes off the back of problems with the EU's approach to African migrants and the countries from which they arrive. The EU tends to focus on migrants from the Middle East as more deserving of consideration for asylum. Moreover, it has invested more to transit countries like Turkey than Morocco, for example. Brexit has helped lend political legitimacy to anti-migrant rhetoric, allowing existing tensions to be exacerbated in Africa-EU relations, but also in the everyday lives of individuals living and working in the UK and the rest of Europe.

For the most part, the EU has ignored the non-economic implications of Brexit outside of Europe, perhaps for understandable reasons. But given its implications for Africa, this could be a mistake. The UK's absence from EU political and social engagement with Africa will definitely change its tone and strategy. The fear must be that the EU fails to acknowledge this and misses an opportunity to create a new positive orientation of the relationship.

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